



February 9, 2016

Airline pilot encourages employees to lift off and soar



"Racism is real, classism is real, sexism is real," said airline pilot Stephanie Grant at a national NAVAIR Black History Month celebration in Patuxent River, Md., Feb. 4. "You have to stand for something, even if you stand alone." Grant made American aviation history when she flew as part of the crew of the first commercial airliner operated by an all-female black flight crew in 2009. (U.S. Navy photo)

NAVAL AIR SYSTEMS COMMAND, PATUXENT RIVER, Md. — Dream big, be prepared and you'll fly to new heights. That was the message airline pilot Stephanie Grant imparted to 375 employees at a Black History Month event held here Feb. 4.

Referencing the four forces of flight — lift, thrust, drag and weight — Grant advised, "The most critical phase of flight is takeoff. In life, while working toward your goal, sometimes, before your life takes flight, you have to pull back," she said, "but a mishap in your plan is just the universe allowing you to cool your jets so you can get back on the runway and try again. Sometimes, life is going to be a drag, so stockpile 'thrust' around you — people to thrust you in a positive direction in the next level of your life. All these forces are working together toward the good; don't go back to the gate. Get yourself back to the runway, and try again."

Grant is best known for being part of the first all-black female crew of a commercial airliner in American history. On Feb. 12, 2009, she made a routine commuter flight from Atlanta, Georgia, to Nashville, Tennessee, with co-pilot Rachelle Jones and flight attendants Diana



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Galloway and Robin Rogers.

"We instantly knew this moment was special, and we'd better get it right," Grant recalled. "Off we went: Flight 5202 took off and flew right into aviation history. Being catapulted into aviation history has given us a great platform to give back."

Grant said she hopes to inspire the next generation, especially black women, to consider aviation as a career. As of 2014, 4.1 percent of airline transport pilots are women, with just 2.7 percent being black.

Born and raised by a single mother in Sumter, South Carolina, Grant caught the "aviation bug" when her uncle took her to Shaw Air Force Base to see the planes take off. One of her most influential mentors was her cousin, Herman Samuels, a retired American Airlines captain. Thanks to his encouragement, at age 30, she embarked on a new career and enrolled in flight school in Florida after serving in the U.S. Army.

She credits her family, mentors and godparents for her success and for laying a strong foundation from which she could succeed. They taught her to take education seriously, instilled good values and imparted the importance of obedience and discipline, lessons she took with her to Hampton University, the Army and flight school.

"I was taught to have a great value system," she said. "You can't care more about the goal than the process. Sometimes, we have morals we don't live up to, but at least we have them. Like a compass, it helps us get back on track."

She also advised employees to be prepared when opportunity strikes.

"Frustration will terminate your dream. If you don't have a plan, then you have a plan to fail," she said. "I had to develop great means — always be prepared."

This event, with a theme of, "Hallowed Grounds: Trendsetters," was sponsored by NAVAIR's Equal Employment Opportunity, Diversity and Inclusion Division and the [African-American Pipelines Advisory Team \(APAT\)](#). This year's celebration marked the 40th year of [National Black History Month](#) and also included a presentation from Dr. Janice Walthour, vice president of the St. Mary's County, Maryland, chapter of the NAACP.

Adrienne Somerville, APAT co-lead, said, "Events like these are opportunities for us to be vulnerable and candid. They demonstrate our willingness and true commitment to inclusion and diversity."

APAT Champion John Meyers echoed Somerville's sentiments: "Ms. Grant is an inspiring trendsetter for us all," he said. "There is much to be gained from events like these, because we all have a rich cultural background to be proud of and a story and life's experiences to share. Thank you for helping us celebrate a culture of inclusion."



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